

JFSP Project Highlights

Research Supporting Sound Decisions

January 2005



The JFSP, a partnership of six federal wildland fire and research organizations, provides scientific information and support for fuel and fire management programs.

JFSP Contacts

Erik Berg
Program Manager
208-387-5349

Becky Jenison
Program Assistant
208-387-5958

Tom Wordell
Fire Technology Transfer
Specialist
208-387-5865

fs.nrlc.gov

Public Acceptance of Wildland Fire Conditions and Fuel Reduction Practices: Challenges for Federal Forest Managers

Background

Public acceptance is critical to successful implementation of natural resource programs on federal lands and is especially important now that the National Fire Plan (NFP) and the Healthy Forest Restoration Act (HFRA) have directed personnel to improve forest conditions through fuel reduction activities. Managers concerned with implementing fuel management programs, especially at the wildland-urban interface, need accurate information about public attitudes toward fire and support for fuel reduction practices.

The purpose of this project was to evaluate the public's perspectives and acceptance of wildland fuel programs on federal forests and rangelands. Surveys took place in seven fire-prone areas in Oregon, Utah, Colorado, Arizona, Georgia, Florida and the Great Lakes Region where citizens are familiar with forest conditions and have a stake in management outcomes.

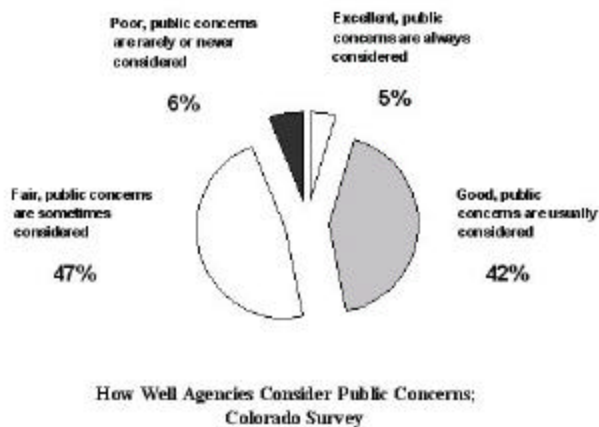
Specific objectives include:

- Assess public opinion about treatment alternatives, smoke management, and agency communication strategies in affected communities.
- Identify factors that influence the acceptability of wildland fuel reduction strategies and decision processes.
- Measure public confidence in resource agencies for effective implementation of fuels reduction practices.

Results

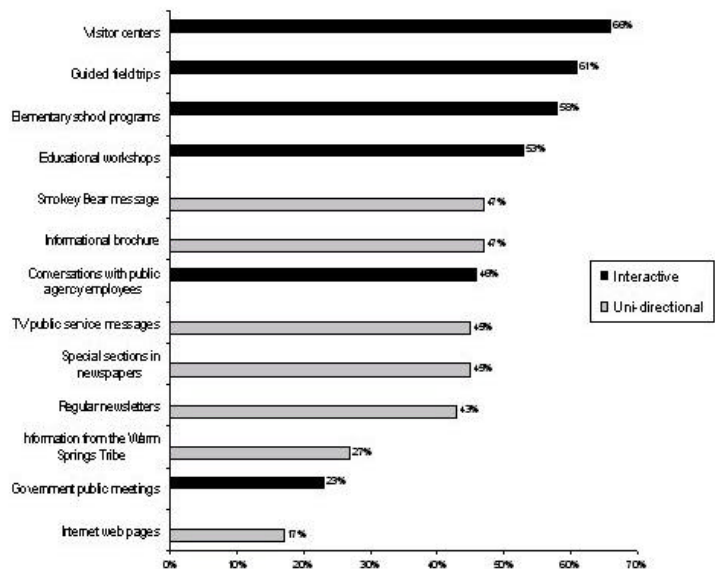
Public opinions on the perceived threat of wildfire, use of various treatment alternatives (prescribed fire, mechanical vegetation removal, restoration planting, and grazing), concerns about possible effects of wildfire, attitudes about smoke, trust in the agencies to make good decisions, and how well agencies consider public concerns

[see Pie Chart for results of survey in Colorado] were collected and analyzed by area.



While responses varied by geographic area, it is interesting to compare and contrast results to gain an understanding of how public opinion and trust in Agency practices vary across the country.

Information and knowledge play an important role in forming support for management practices. Citizens rated the usefulness of different agency information programs. Ratings were influenced by factors such as ease of understanding and credibility. Outreach programs were displayed as either interactive or uni-directional in nature. Overall, citizens rated information conveyed by guided field trips, conversations with public agency employees, visitor centers, and elementary school programs the most useful. Internet web sites, government public meetings, and government publications were rated as the least useful [see Bar Graph for results of survey in Central Oregon].



**Usefulness of Fire/Fuel Information Programs;
Oregon Survey**

Conclusions

Respondents are aware of a high risk for wildfire in all of the communities surveyed and overall are very supportive of fuel treatments. They are willing to give managers the greatest discretion to implement thinning and restoration planting and also indicated the most trust in agencies to utilize one of these treatments (depending on the area surveyed). Regarding the use of prescribed fire, respondents were worried about a variety of effects, including recreation opportunities, potential damage to private property, increased levels of soil erosion, public water supplies, loss of wildlife habitat, and the risk of prescribed fires going out of control. Many were concerned about impacts from smoke, but findings further suggest that although smoke is an inconvenience, most respondents feel that it is managed in an acceptable manner. A substantial majority place trust in the Federal, Tribal, State, and County governments to make good decisions regarding fire. Participants recognized interactive forms of communication as the most useful outreach activities for fire management.

The management issues discussed in this study are all important to citizens, especially when their local communities are subject to the threat of wildfire and various fuel treatments. Although responses show a majority of the public in favor of fire management practices, a number of citizens are likely to withhold their full support of manager's actions. Experience from forest communities indicates that citizens will be waiting to see how well these policies play out before making final judgments.

Principal Investigator:

- Dr. Bruce Shindler, Department of Forest Resources **Oregon State University**

You can obtain further information at: <http://oregonstate.edu/~shindleb/jfsp/>

Download a printable version of this JFSP Project Highlight at <http://jfsp.nifc.gov/news/doc/highlight.pdf>

Download previous JFSP Project Highlights at <http://jfsp.nifc.gov/news/archives.htm>